



# Coaches' Quarterly

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**What Do You Do  
When You Fail?**

**Social Networking  
and Appropriate  
Boundaries**

**Veteran Coaches  
Serve as Mentors**

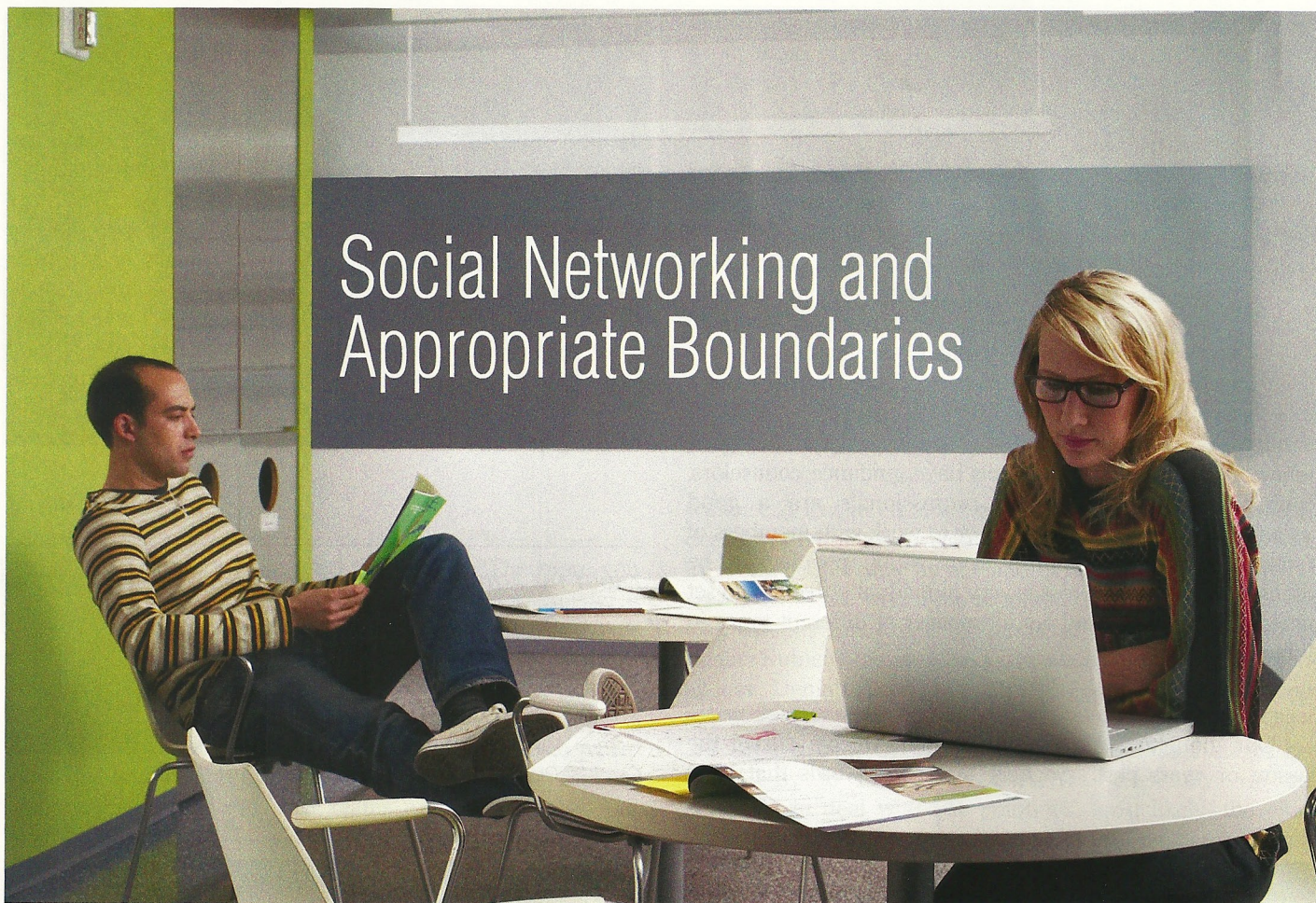


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# Social Networking and Appropriate Boundaries



By Chris Stankovich, Ph.D.

**W**hen it comes to coaching kids, developing a delicate balance of being coach, teacher and friend can be very challenging, to say the least. In an ideal situation, successful coaches develop and maintain appropriate boundaries and guidelines within each role, leading to positive holistic development and growth for all student-athletes on the team.

Successful coaches continually develop a philosophy and personal style that enable them to do the following things: instruct technical athletic skills, teach life skills from athletic experiences that can be applied to school and future careers, and occasionally even wear the hat of “friend” when student-athletes need a place to turn in times of need.

Some coaches seem to naturally develop this healthy balance, while others struggle wearing all three hats – and in worst-case scenarios, step over the integrity line and abuse coach-student athlete boundaries.

Unfortunately, the issue of establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries between coaches and student-athletes is a growing concern in America today, as cases of inappropriate relationships involving alcohol, drugs and sexual activity continue to occur. Following are some suggestions for appropriate behaviors and relationships.

► Responsible coaches always keep in mind the tremendous amount of trust that has been put on them. In many instances, the role a coach plays in a young person’s life is almost as important as a parent (and in some instances the coach may even become a “pseudo-parent”). The trust kids have in a coach is a very special thing, and the relationship coaches develop with kids can lead to either a prosperous, healthy personal growth experience through sport participation or a lifetime of painful memories due to short-sighted thinking and inappropriate and potentially illegal behaviors.

► Since most coaches operate autonomously (meaning they act on their own and are guided by their own thinking and behaviors), responsible coaches know that it is vitally important to police their own behaviors. If something doesn’t feel right, i.e., going to a student-athlete’s party or exchanging e-mail or text messages, they stop the behavior and take time to think about the possible consequences of their actions. Not only may the behavior be inappropriate, it may even be illegal; that’s why it is so important to think about their actions.



- ▶ The coach is in a position of tremendous power. Responsible coaches do not take this lightly. Kids on the team will often do whatever the coach says they should do, even if they feel uncomfortable or know that what is being asked of them doesn't feel right. Sadly, some irresponsible coaches take advantage of this coercive dynamic and abuse the power of being a coach. In these instances, many terrible things can occur, including the loss of employment as a coach, a child left with terrible emotional scarring, and possibly even incarceration if the activities are illegal.
- ▶ While the age of consent varies from state to state, responsible coaches know one thing is certain: It is never appropriate to develop a sexual relationship with a student-athlete (even if he/she is above the age of consent). The relationship that coaches build with student-athletes is predicated on trust, and the adult must always maintain that trust under all circumstances. Good coaches realize that it is ultimately their responsibility – not the child's – to ensure that an inappropriate relationship doesn't develop. Developing a dual-relationship – being the coach and also carrying on a sexual relationship with a stu-

Avoiding this type of communication is another way responsible coaches avoid any inappropriate behavior.

- ▶ Responsible coaches discuss their communication style early and often with both parents and student-athletes, making sure to convey how they prefer to communicate (e-mail, phone or in-person), as well as when they are available to communicate. They know that it is important to establish these guidelines so that fewer impromptu meetings occur – making inappropriate relationships less likely to occur as well.
- ▶ Responsible coaches use appropriate language when working with kids. They minimize the use of coarse, vulgar and profane language, and they do not make comments that could be viewed as racist, sexist or unfairly biased. These coaches realize that unprofessional language can lead to the development of loose, casual relationships, which can later lead to a deterioration of the coach/student-athlete dynamic, often contributing to inappropriate coach/student-athlete relationships.

**“Remember, it is always the coach’s responsibility to act like an adult at all times and prevent inappropriate relationships from occurring.”**

dent-athlete – is never appropriate. Using the excuse that “the student-athlete caused this to happen” is also unacceptable.

- ▶ A growing concern, and often an antecedent condition when it comes to inappropriate relationships between coaches and student-athletes, is the use (and abuse) of Internet social networking pages. Responsible coaches know how to effectively create and monitor their social networking pages, i.e., MySpace, Facebook. They only display appropriate pictures and content, and they exclude sexual innuendo, coarse language and pictures that include sexual and/or drug and alcohol themes. Good coaches regularly examine their pages to make sure the content is appropriate, and that it is suitable for student-athletes who may visit their sites.
- ▶ Responsible coaches know that social networking pages often create depersonalized communication between people. E-mailing, instant-messaging and texting are examples of casual communication that can quickly become a “slippery slope” when it comes to inappropriate relationships developing. Good coaches steer clear of communication that can be misinterpreted as emotional or sexually-oriented.

- ▶ Responsible coaches meet with kids at appropriate times and places, steering away from questionable places, i.e., casually outside of school, and instead use more appropriate locations, such as the school office. Additionally, they typically meet with kids while having other adults around, and keep the door of the office open whenever possible. Obviously, meeting with student-athletes in private places, especially late after school, is never a wise decision and should be avoided whenever possible.

When good coaches find themselves in awkward positions with student-athletes, they know how important it is to think and act responsibly. Remember, it is always the coach's responsibility to act like an adult at all times and prevent inappropriate relationships from occurring. The way coaches conduct themselves, their level of professionalism, and the examples they set for kids is very important and cannot be overstated. **CQ**

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